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ABSTRACT

Data provided by the 1981-82 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were used to study the citizenship and social studies achievement of rural 13-year-olds. The NAEP extreme rural sample included 901 13-year-olds from schools in areas with less than 10,000 people and many farmers or farm workers in residence. School size in this sample ranged from 115 to 1,013 students. The 13-year-olds from the extreme rural communities performed slightly below the national levels for their age group on all five of the citizenship/social studies objectives. By comparison, 13-year-olds in "disadvantaged-urban" communities, where a relatively high proportion of people were on welfare or were not regularly employed, fell significantly below the national performance levels on all objectives while those in "advantaged-urban" communities, where a relatively high proportion of residents were in professional or managerial positions, did significantly better than the national performance levels on all objectives. Looking at the specific areas tested--acquiring information, using information, understanding individual development and communicating with others, understanding human organization, and understanding the development of the United States--the rural students did best on objectives that focused on skills and worst on objectives that dealt primarily with factual knowledge. (JHZ)

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# UPDATE ON THE CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL STUDIES ACHIEVEMENT OF RURAL 13-YEAR-OLDS

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In the autumn of 1983 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released the results of the 1981-82 citizenship/social studies assessment (NAEP, 1983a). That made it possible to update our knowledge of the citizenship and social studies achievement of young rural Americans. The most recent report on that subject (Easton, 1984-85) was based on earlier National Assessments and other studies completed prior to 1983. The purpose of this article is to present some findings of the third National Assessment of citizenship and social studies that pertain to the educational attainments of rural 13-year-olds.

## Background

National Assessment is a census-like survey of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of young Americans in 10 subject-matter areas. NAEP began in 1963 with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. The first assessment was launched in 1969 (Greenbaum, 1977). Currently, NAEP is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by the Educational Testing Service, a non-profit corporation headquartered at Princeton, New Jersey.

Since 1979 NAEP has developed an archive of computer tapes in order to make National Assessment data available to researchers in a useable form (NAEP, 1981). These tapes, known as public-use data tapes, were developed under grants from the National Institute of Education and the National Science Foundation.



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The 1981-82 National Assessment of Educational Progress surveyed 9, 13, and 17-year-olds in mathematics, citizenship, and social studies. We obtained the public-use data tape for the assessment of 13-year-olds (NAEP, 1983b). The 1981-82 NAEP extreme rural sample included 901 13-year-olds from schools located in areas with less than 10,000 people where many of the residents are farmers or farm workers. The rural schools in the sample ranged in enrollment from 115 to 1,013 students (NAEP, 1983b).

National Assessment (1983a) reported citizenship/social studies results by size and type of community. The 13-year-olds from extreme rural communities performed slightly below the national levels for their age group on all five of the citizenship/social studies objectives. By comparison, 13-year-olds in "disadvantaged-urban" communities, where a relatively high proportion of people were on welfare or were not regularly employed, fell significantly below the national performance levels on all objectives while those in "advantaged-urban" communities, where a relatively high proportion of residents were in professional or managerial positions, did significantly better than the national performance levels on all objectives.

## Citizenship/Social Studies Achievement of Rural 13-Year-Olds

In the following paragraphs, we summarize and highlight the findings of the 1981-82 NAEP citizenship/social studies



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assessment with respect to rural 13-year-olds. We examined the data on the public-use data tape (NAEP, 1983b) and consulted the six exercise booklets (NAEP, 1983c) in order to report results on selected exercises. Since National Assessment used 172 unique exercises to measure achievement of five major objectives, we will discuss only enough of them to clarify the objectives and to illustrate the range of performance by the rural 13-year-old sample on each objective.

Acquiring Information

NAEP Objective I focused on "skills necessary to acquire information." It included "using one's senses, using a wide range of source materials, using data-gathering techniques and critically evaluating available information" (NAEP, 1980, p.2). National Assessment used 15 exercises to determine the achievement levels of 13-year-olds on Objective I. The mean percentage of extreme rural 13-year-olds giving acceptable answers to those exercises was 77%.

Nearly 91% of the rural 13-year-old sample knew that a glossary is a place to look for the meaning of a word. About 80% of the rural youths chose the best geographic reference for comparing the area of two places. A little over 60% of the sample was able to select from alternatives the question that would be best to use in an opinion survey. On the other hand, only about one-half of these 13-year-olds could select the question that would most likely elicit the type of information required to detemine what people think about a



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local issue and only 37% were able to identify from among alternatives the question that could most appropriately be answered through a public opinion poll.

Using Information

National Assessment Objective II was directed toward "skills necessary to use information." It included "organizing and applying information and taking steps necessary to make decisions and solve problems" (NAEP, 1980, p. 2). The 1981-82 citizenship and social studies assessment contained 22 exercises designed to measure achievement of 13-year-olds on Objective II. The mean percentage of extreme rural 13-year-olds who answered those exercises correctly was 75%.

Almost all--92%--of the rural youths sampled were able to differentiate between important and unimportant information about candidates for student council representative. About 85% recognized the correct sequence in the process of producing bread from wheat. Likewise, 85% of the rural 13-year-olds chose the referendum as the best way to resolve a long-term controversy over the future of a city. Nearly three-fourths of the rural students were able to recognize the best statement in support of an assertion of fact. Given a chart of information, 73% of the sample correctly identified a conclusion that could be made from it. About two-thirds of the rural youths were able to identify a time line that showed the change in the way most people in the world obtain their



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food from early history to the present. Given a set of tabulated data, 62% chose the best statement of a hypothesis that could be generated from it. Sixty percent were able to distinguish between statements of fact and statements of opinion. Only 41% of the rural 13-year-olds could correctly identify the main idea of a paragraph. About one-fifth of the sample could identify a statement supported by data in a chart.

Understanding Individual Development and Communicating with Others

Objective III of the 1981-82 citizenship and social studies assessment dealt with "an understanding of individual development and the skills necessary to communicate with others." It included "examining one's and others' personal beliefs and values and those skills that promote effective personal interactions" (NAEP, 1980, p. 2). NAEP used 16 exercises to determine the achievement levels of 13-year-olds on Objective III. The mean percentage of extreme rural 13-year-olds giving acceptable responses to those exercises was 72%.

Overwhelmingly, 93% of the rural youths surveyed recognized that every student in a class has a right to express an opinion. By the same proportion they indicated they would allow a minority of one to state his or her position on an issue among friends planning an activity together. Nearly 90% of the 13-year-olds showed sensitivity



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to the values and customs of another culture as visitors to that culture. About 87% were able to identify a solution to a family decision-making problem that would best show respect for every family member's wishes. Sixty percent of the sample recognized that the leader of a group should encourage discussion of various viewpoints on proposals for actions the group might take. Approximately 56% of the rural youths recognized that political protesters are allowed to express their beliefs without violating the rights of others. About one-half indicated they would accept a foreign custom that differed from their own. Slightly less than one-third of the rural 13-year-olds were able to recognize a description of a situation that showed a difference in value judgements between two people.

Understanding Human Organization, Adaptation, and Change

NAEP Objective IV focused on "understanding of and interest in the ways human beings organize, adapt to and change their environments." It included understanding human developments and "understanding and appreciating societal interrelationships and showing commitment to human justice and rights worldwide" (NAEP, 1980, p. 2). National Assessment used 26 exercises to measure the achievement of 13-year-olds on Objective IV. The mean percentage of extreme rural 13-year-olds who answered those exercises correctly was 69%.

Nearly 94% of the youths from extreme rural communities were able to differentiate between finite and infinite sources



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of energy. A large majority, 83%, recognized that sharing a common cultural background is one reason why people join some groups. About three-fourths of the rural 13-year-olds were able to identify statements that indicated a difference of opinion between friends. Almost 60% of the sample recognized that people learn to value energy efficient appliances and automobiles as energy sources become scarcer and more expensive. About one-half of the rural 13-year-olds knew the type of area where most settlements have developed historically. A similar proportion recognized that sharing a common goal is one reason why people join some groups. Forty percent of the rural youths responded that superstitions are ways to deal with fear of the unknown.

Understanding the Development of the United States

NAEP Objective V focused on "understanding of and interest in the development of the United States." It included "understanding and appreciating U. S. history; political, governmental and judicial procedures; the economic and social structure of society; an understanding of rights; and a commitment to civic responsibility and justice for all people in this country" (NAEP, 1980, p. 2). The 1981-82 citizenship and social studies assessment contained 93 exercises designed to measure the achievement of 13-year-olds on Objective V. The mean percentage of extreme rural 13-year-olds who answered those exercises correctly was 55%.



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Nearly all--99%--of the rural youths knew that the President of the United States is usually elected to the office. Ninety-five percent knew that the courts are responsible for determining whether someone has violated a law. About 94% were aware that the Federal Government does not provide jobs for everyone. Almost 90% of the rural 13-year-olds correctly labeled a description of a workers' action as a strike. Over 80% responded that a girl who is as good in a sport as a boy on the team should be able to play on the same team. A similar proportion indicated they were the kind of student who would want to help change an unfair school rule. About three-fourths of the rural students said that it was not true that they rarely bothered to vote in school elections. Seventy-one percent knew that slaves in the United States had no rights and were considered as property prior to 1865. About 70% of the 13-year-olds answered that a person witnessed in the act of committing a crime should have a trial by jury if he or she wants one. A similar proportion knew that no one has the power to sentence a person to prison without that person's going to court. Over two-thirds of the rural sample recognized that most of the rights contained in the U. S. Constitution are for the purpose of protecting individual freedoms. About 65% knew that strangers to a community can pass out literature critical of the United States as long as they do not break any laws.



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Nearly 60% of the rural 13-year-olds recognized that Congress writes laws. About one-half knew that Congress is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Forty-seven percent correctly identified a quotation as being from the Declaration of Independence. Nearly one-third of the extreme rural sample knew that a person found not guilty could not be tried again. Approximately 32% knew that an accused person cannot be required to testify against himself or herself. Only about one-fourth of the rural youths were aware that a President cannot declare a law unconstitutional. About 23% knew that members of the U. S. Supreme Court decide if laws are constitutional. Only 18% knew that poll taxes prevented certain groups of people from voting. Eleven percent of the rural students correctly responded that an agency that enforces a law passed by Congress can specify what that law means in some cases. Only 9% recognized the Brown versus the Board of Education decision as having declared that separate schools for blacks and whites are inherently unequal.

## Summary

The NAEP sample of extreme rural 13-year-olds performed best on the exercises related to acquiring and using information (Objectives I and II). Their results on understanding individual development and communicating with others (Objective III) and understanding human organization, adaptation, and change (Objective IV) were only slightly lower. The lowest rate of correct responses by the rural



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youths was to exercises related to facts about the development of the United States (Objective V). Viewed from another perspective, these rural students did best on objectives that focused on skills, worst on objectives that dealt primarily with factual knowledge. That may be a positive outcome indicating that rural youths are developing skills for lifelong learning, not merely stockpiling ammunition for use in trivia contests.

Let us reconsider three of the exercises under Objective V that a large majority of the sample answered incorrectly. These items were concerned with the effects of poll taxes, the powers of Federal administrative agencies, and the name of a major Supreme Court case (Brown versus the Board of Education). Is there cause for alarm if only a few 13-year-olds can answer correctly questions on these topics? We think not. The results on these items seem to be more than offset by those that indicate understanding of rights and principles and the possession of learning skills and democratic attitudes. Furthermore, the content of the items probably was not emphasized in the curriculum that 13-year-olds would have experienced.

Although National Assessment objectives are developed through an elaborate process, they do not necessarily reflect what all students ought to learn nor what all communities consider important. NAEP is objective-referenced. It is focused on what people can do rather than how much they know



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or how well they perform in comparison with others. Interpretation of National Assessment findings rests very much upon the value placed upon each objective and sub-objective by individual interpreters. Greenbaum (1977) charged that NAEP objectives were traditional, bland, and simplified and that the process used to produce them was insensitive to changes in educational purposes. Reasonable disagreements over the importance of specific NAEP objectives and exercises persist to the present. Each school district should evaluate the appropriateness of each objective and test item when applying the assessment to local settings.

To the extent that the 1981-82 NAEP citizenship/social studies assessment measured progress on important educational goals, there was "good news and bad news" concerning rural 13-year-olds. The good news was that the performance of the rural students was only slightly below the national levels. The bad news was that it was significantly below that of 13-year-olds from "advantaged urban" communities. Rural 13-year-olds were in the mainstream of social studies and citizenship achievement in the nation, according to the 1981-82 National Assessment. If there is any concern stemming from this assessment about the performance of rural youths or the quality of the educational programs they receive, it should be over the unfavorable comparison of the "extreme rural" results to those of the "advantaged urban" sample. Educational decision makers should examine the differences in

achievement, schools, curriculums, and students and recommend methods to improve citizenship/social studies education for rural youths.

Finally, although National Assessment surveyed a national "extreme rural" sample, there are no national rural students or schools. It would be inappropriate, therefore, to assume that the national results are representative of any particular rural school. Certainly, there were 13-year-olds attending rural schools smaller than any included in the NAEP sample. Replication of the assessment, using those exercises that have been released to the public, is the only way to find out how 13-year-olds in a local rural school perform on the NAEP exercises. Procedures for conducting local assessments are outlined in an article entitled "Applying the National Assessment Model to Research on Rural Social Studies" (Easton, 1983).



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